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DEPT FOR G/TIP HALL, DRL/ILCSR HAILEY

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SUBJECT: COTTON FORCED LABOR PROSECUTIONS IN THE SOUTH

REF: (A) 08 Dushanbe 1256

(B) 08 Dushanbe 1388

¶1. (U) Summary: Prosecutors in Tajikistan's Khatlon Region have begun pursuing charges against officials for forcing students to participate in the cotton harvest. These are the first such cases filed in Tajikistan, and demonstrate that at least some officials are prepared to uphold the law. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Nosirjon Mamurzoda, a stringer for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Khatlon has filed several stories on cases against local officials who forced students to participate in the 2008 cotton harvest in Khatlon. He has spoken to victims about the conditions to which they were subjected during the harvest, and he has maintained contacts in the prosecutors' offices which are pursuing the actions. According to Mamurzoda, prosecutors have filed cases in Sarband, Shahritus, and Kubodiyon.

¶3. (SBU) In Sarband, a local prosecutor found that students from a vocational school were forced to pick cotton in October. School officials organized the students' transport to the cotton field in Jami, and the director of the school expelled 30 students who refused to participate. The prosecutor filed administrative (not criminal) charges in November or December, asking that the teachers be reprimanded. Of the 30 expelled students 21 were allowed to return; the remaining 9 were drafted into military service. Mamurzoda had heard that 10 teachers at the school were reprimanded by Ministry of Education officials; he was unsure of the punishment. The director of the school was not punished.

¶4. (SBU) Both cases in Shahrtus and Kubodiyon are criminal cases in which prosecutors are investigating the culpability of local officials in injuries suffered by 5 children forced to work in the cotton fields. Mamurzoda was unsure of whether the injuries were caused while the children were being transported to the fields or while the children were actually working in the fields. The injuries were severe enough to require hospitalization. While the details of the criminal investigations are sketchy, Mamurzoda said there was enough information to prove that officials in both towns organized and supervised school children between the ages of 14 and 17 working in the cotton fields, in violation of the Law on Education. The accused in Shahritus is the Deputy Chairman of the town's government; in Kubodiyon. The accused is the head of the Department of Education.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: These cases are the first (and only) cases lodged against Tajik officials in relation to forced labor and child labor in the cotton sector (see refs A and B). Mamurzoda attributed this effort to hold officials accountable to the regional prosecutor, Foziljon Akhunov. While the cases are positive step toward addressing an important human rights concern, they do not represent a national-level effort. That's the necessary next step which embassy is pushing for. End comment.

JACOBSON